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ABSTRACT

Studies of graduate student perceptions of the advanced learning experience are reviewed. Findings include the following: the specialized requirements of the disciplines create unique expectations and pressures that affect students' academic and personal well-being (Baird, 1974); faculty acceptance of opinions held by students and the quality of advising are two dimensions that significantly correlate with graduate student satisfaction (Reagan, 1976); collegiality is the best predictor of academic and nonacademic satisfaction among graduate students (Gregg, 1972); and department heads and faculty often have an inflated notion of their program's strength (Hartnett, 1976). The work by Hartnett considered the following critical dimensions of the departmental environment that influence student perceptions: (1) the nature and quality of student relations with the faculty, (2) the extent to which the department can be regarded as a true "community," (3) the degree of faculty attention to and concern for teaching, (4) procedures and philosophy related to the evaluation of graduate student performance, and (5) the rigidity and/or flexibility of the formal curricular requirements. Each of these dimensions is discussed, and it is concluded that some of these qualities are at the heart of the training. (SW)

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ADVANCED STUDIES: A RESEARCH TO DATE SUMMARY

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Though graduate studies have received a small share of higher education research attention, a clear pattern of graduate student perceptions and evaluations of advanced learning environments exists. Centered upon the graduate department as the unit of analysis, this pattern suggests pertinent issues that graduate school administrators and admissions officers must face.

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Multivariate studies on graduate work emerge in three clusters: (1) studies of the student perceptions of their graduate experience, (2) studies of socialization into a discipline or profession and (3) studies on personal issues in graduate school. This brief summarizes research in the first cluster. A clear pattern of graduate student values concerning advanced learning environments exists.

POINT 1

At a major university, Baird longitudinally studied the perception of a large sample of students in five graduate departments; Arts and Humanities, Biological Science, Physical Science, Social Science and Education. Using an extensive questionnaire, Baird examined how the department environments differed. His major results convey the idea that the specialized requirements of the disciplines create unique expectations and pressures that shape student behavior and affect their

academic and personal well-being (Baird, 1974). This reflects a general pattern: graduate school environments are as unique as each department. Therefore, a graduate school is most fruitfully considered as a set of learning environments rather than as a unit. At the graduate

POINT 2 level, the department, not the school is the correct unit of analysis.

A doctoral dissertation by Reagan (1976) summarized the satisfactions of 1370 graduate students with aspects of the academic environment in the School of Humanities, Social Science and Education at Purdue University. With respect to overall satisfaction with their graduate studies, he found no correlation with sex, marital status, degree objective, area of study, academic load, use of student services, or inter-student competition. Two dimensions correlated significantly with graduate student

POINT 3 satisfaction. These were faculty acceptance of opinions held by students and quality of advising (including both program and career planning). This suggests that faculty-student interaction is a critical area in the study of a graduate teaching-learning environment.

Gregg (1972) studied several factors affecting graduate student satisfaction. At a mid-western school he constructed Likert scales for five variables: faculty-student relationships (collegiality), student-student relationships (competitiveness), expectation-reality discrepancy, academic satisfaction, and non-academic satisfaction. Like Reagan's study, the results indicated that more collegial faculty-student relation-ships produce higher levels of both academic and non-academic satisfaction. Unlike Reagan's study, Gregg found that inter-student competition correlated negatively rather than neutrally with student

POINT 4 satisfaction. Gregg concluded that collegiality is the best predictor of academic and non-academic satisfaction among graduate students.

Assessing the learning climate at four graduate level business schools and one graduate professional school, Bowen (1975) extracted five fairly independent (av. intercorrelations=.33) and internally consistent (av. a=.84) factors from all samples. These were Grading Process, Physical Environment, Task Relationships with Faculty, Social Relationships with Faculty and Course Material Presentation. At face value this evidence suggests valid and useful clustering of student perceptions about advanced educational environments.

Hartnett, in writing the environment chapter for Scholars in the Making (Katz and Hartnett, 1976), a major study of graduate education, analyzed two sources of student perceptions. He worked with large bases of questionnaire data gathered by the Wright Institute and the Educational Testing Service at hundreds of graduate schools. Secondly, he leaned heavily upon interviews with students. Hartnett articulated a more vivid conception of important social-psychological dimensions of graduate and professional school environments than previous researchers. As to the use value of his efforts, he stated:

> Department chairmen and faculty often have an inflated notion of their programs strength and are often nearly blind to the realities of their weaknesses. What chairmen and other faculty members often think about their departmental program may differ dramatically from what graduate students perceive to be the case...Department chairmen and graduate faculty are often surprisingly oblivious of the attitudes and feelings of their graduate students. (p. 55)

POINT 5

This comment underscores the usefulness of student perceptions in understanding an educational environment.

Hartnett's chapter discusses five critical dimensions of the departmental environment that influence student perceptions.

1. The nature and quality of student relations with the faculty.
2. The extent to which the department can be regarded as a true "community".
3. The degree of faculty attention to and concern for teaching.
4. Procedures and philosophy related to the evaluation of graduate student performance.
5. The rigidity and/or flexibility of the formal curricular requirements.

Hartnett's First Dimension: RELATIONSHIPS

With respect to the first dimension, Hartnett states a major conclusion of his research:

> Graduate student relations with members of the faculty is regarded by most graduate students as the single most important aspect of the quality of their graduate experience; unfortunately, many also report that it is the single most disappointing aspect. (p. 262)

POINT 6

Faculty-student relations consist of two components; the first is accessibility and the second is how the faculty tend to treat students. Hartnett found it disconcerting to note the large percentage of graduate students who complain about how difficult it can be to even get to see a faculty member. How much a faculty member is present on campus and holding appointment hours can be used as a base line indicator of access. This of course, few graduate faculty members favor and in fact runs contrary to many of the central required activities of graduate faculty as perceived by themselves.

POINT 7

The manner in which faculty treat students is the second component. The extent to which faculty consider students as (1) adults, (2) potentially competent professionals in the field, and (3) capable of justifiably opposed and respectable opinions

significantly influences graduate student perceptions. Few graduate students wanted to be considered co-equal with members of the faculty, they only wanted a degree of respect and appreciation of ability more than they currently received as the perceptual victims of "prolonged adolescence."

Hartnett's Second Dimension: COMMUNITY

Hartnett reports the second major environmental dimension as a sense of "community or togetherness" among the student and faculty members of the department. This dimension factored out in three ways: (1) the perception of the department as a network of relationships, (2) the consensus of department faculty on the purposes, major issues and problems in the discipline; and (3) the spirit of cooperation, openness and trust in department activities.

On the first factor of the department as a network of relationships, graduate students reported their shock at the discovery of the comparative isolation that most graduate studies require--isolation by more time spent alone in studies, isolation by the narrowness and specialization of graduate education that approaches provincialism or "knowing everything about nothing". The further a student proceeds in a field, the harder it is to establish a meaningful relationship outside. On the plus side, departments do, to a varied degree, function as social environment. The graduate students find the "humaness" of interaction satisfying as they get to know faculty outside the role of instructor.

The second factor in "sense of community" is how well faculty members perceptions agree on the goals and purposes of the department.

POINT 8 <u>If departments are administrative conveniences, "pot pourri" or</u>

organized in theory or on paper only, the department is perceived as a collection or aggregate rather than a group. Scholarly interests and differences of opinion on even fundamental questions is appreciated when tied together by a unifying vision of what every one is after, otherwise there is a strong negative influence on the climate for learning.

The third "community" factor influencing student perception is the extent to which trust and respect rather than jealousy and suspicion characterize the environment. This factor can vary widely from institution to institution. Hartnett gives the following chart to illustrate this.

GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EXTENT TO WHICH THEIR DEPT. IS HUMANE: THREE DISCIPLINES AND THREE DEPARTMENT, ALL WITH REPUTATIONAL RANKINGS AMONG THE TOP 20

("This department has a humane environment characterized by mutual respect and concern between students and professors.")

	Percent of students indicating that they: "Agree Strongly"		
Institutions	Chemistry	History	Psychology
A	6.7	5.6	14.3
B	20.5	34.1	36.4
C	18.6	17.4	6.9

Source: Unpublished data gathered in 1975 survey by Educational Testing Service

POINT 9 This trust vs. suspicion quality of advanced learning environments, virtually invisible to the prospective student soon surfaces to the enrolled student.

Hartnett's Third Dimension: TEACHING

Hartnett's third major dimension of graduate department environment is faculty concern for teaching. Students make judgements about this dimension by faculty behavior and attitude. That is, how hard do faculty work at their teaching and to what extent does

POINT 10 the department instill in students a sense of the importance of the role of teaching for future career? In some departments, little attention is given either formally or informally to preparing grad students for the role of teaching. Departments varied significantly. Two English departments rated reputationally in the top ten in the U.S.A. were perceived as having much or very much concern for teaching; in one case by 6% of its students, in the other case by 56% of its students (p. 63). Reward structures at the institutions have quite a

POINT 11 bit to do with this type of difference.

Hartnett's Fourth Dimension: EVALUATION

The fourth dimension expressed by graduate students in Hartnett's study is a concern for accurate and fair grading of their performances. Hartnett speculates that this dimension is increasing in importance due to poor job markets and the resultant decrease in number of graduate students who will find university and college placement. The perceived need to ingratiate themselves to faculty ranged from 66% in one department to 20% in another. In some departments, the performance philosophy is that every student who withdraws is considered a failure of the department as much as failure of the students. In other departments, the concept is more like "survival

of the fittest."

In this regard, Dr. Benjamin Bloom has stated that many top notch institutions used the "dog eat dog" mentality. As an example he cited the behavior of the Dean at a prestigious medical school who would, on the first day of class tell the entering student body to get a good look at him now because only 50% of them would be around four years later on graduation day to see him then. This med school now graduates 98 out of every 100 entering students and is still rated in the top ten. Certainly improved quality of student ability was not the primary factor influencing this change in retention. The philosophy of evaluation changed.

POINT 13 Students generally perceive that the quality of their work is judged either comparatively with other students or primarily upon the basis of attaining the required skills and knowledge. Two brief quotes from graduate students illustrate these different perceptions:

> "It's no secret. We are being judged against one another. That's what it's all about."

> "Many of us meet informally to prepare for exams and seminars. So I don't think anyone could say that it is competitive here in that sense."

Student's have another concern about performance evaluation. Often, students do not feel they are getting enough feedback about their performances. This is a special problem for graduate students. As one gets further along in advanced studies, grades no longer discriminate performance. Most students are getting good grades.

Hartnett's Fifth Dimension: CURRICULUM

A fifth and final dimension reported by Hartnett is

curriculum. Students approached this from two perspectives. First, the rigidity or flexibility of course requirements concerned students. Second, the intellectual "tunnel vision" that develops through a lack of appreciation for what approaches other disciplines offer. Disciplinary insularity hints at the need for interdisciplinary approaches.

On the first component, departments that held to a rigid curriculum paid more attention to the process of education. And in some disciplines such as counseling or medicine, this seems appropriate.

POINT 15 On the second, students objected to what they conceived as scholarly parochialism. "They (the department) wouldn't even think to say, 'maybe over in Philosophy they approach this problem differently and the different assumptions might lead me to question mine." (p.82)

CONCLUSION

Student perceptions are critical in understanding graduate studies. Hartnett concludes his report on the social-psychological dimensions of graduate school environments with a remark that serves well to raise our concerns:

> To many of the graduate faculty and administrators, these more subtle aspects of graduate training
> POINT 16 may seem to be unimportant if not downright irrelevant; to the students, however, some of these qualities are at the heart of their training. (p.83)

Desirable qualities in graduate programs are not mysterious.

POINT 17 One needs only to ask the students to understand the attractiveness of various advanced learning environments.

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